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# Internet kao virtualna javna sfera – Mrežni forumi i ograničenja ideje

## Sažetak

Uzimajući kao referencu model deliberativne demokracije, naš je cilj pristupiti demokratskoj mogućnosti mrežnih nestalnih prostora kako bi istodobno karakterizirali komunikaciju zapaženu unutar njih. Glavna svrha je procijeniti obećanja i ograničenja mrežnih foruma, u pristupu tehnologiji koja potencira internet kao binu za političko sudjelovanje kao virtualnu javnu sferu. Uzimajući u obzir da pojedinci različito koriste ove prostore, izgleda da mrežni forumi za diskusije ne ispunjavaju idealne potrebe javnog područja, sugerirajući objašnjenja za mrežnu političku ravnodušnost i nedostatak deliberativne debate. Zaključujemo sa preduvjetima da se priključimo u demokratski potencijal interneta kako bismo zaštitili i ohrabрили njegov potencijal za demokratskim dogovorom.

**Ključne riječi:** mrežni, deliberativna demokracija, javna sfera, komunikacija, političko sudjelovanje

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# The internet as a virtual public sphere - Forums online and the limitations of an idea

## Summary

Taking as reference the deliberative democracy model, our aim is to assess the democratic potential of online discursive spaces to simultaneously characterize the communication observed within them. The main objective is to evaluate the promises and limitations of online forums, in an approach to technology that emphasizes the Internet as a platform for political participation, as a virtual public sphere. Considering the different types of uses that individuals make of these spaces, it seems that the online discussion forums do not meet the ideal requirements of the public sphere, suggesting explanations for online political apathy and lack of deliberative debate. We conclude with the prerequisites to tap into the Internet's democratic potential in order to protect and encourage its opportunities for democratic deliberation.

**Key words:** online, deliberative democracy, public sphere, communication, political participation.

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## Media and the deliberative ideal

Over the last twenty years, the concepts of "digital democracy", "electronic democracy" or "cyberdemocracy" are being used more often, raising great expectations as to the renewed possibility of democratic participation. Furthermore, there is a growing interest in new practices provided by networked computers and the possibilities they offer to exercise civic practices. In essence, we seek to identify alternatives for civil participation in policy-making, considering aspects such as the increase in discursive practices based on a new notion of democracy - deliberative democracy.

I take as a starting point the idea of deliberative democracy - understood as a democracy concept that sees individuals as autonomous agents, called to consider alternatives and different points of view, critically appraising and forming value judgments, where the legitimacy of a decision stems from the fact that it is the result of a generalized deliberative process.

The challenge here is to find ways to develop a better knowledge of democratic practices by extending the deliberative processes. One of the influential thinkers of deliberation, James Fishkin (1992), points out three under which deliberation practices are possible: 1. that political messages can be exchanged in all their extension, 2. that there are opportunities to reflect on new messages, and their reflexive discussion, 3. that messages could be intersubjectively tested in comparison with rival arguments. From this point of view, it is suggested that media institutions have great potential in the development of deliberative democracy.

They can do so, on the one hand, by providing individuals with forms of knowledge and information to which they would not have access otherwise. Interaction through the media can stimulate deliberation "as much, if not more, than face to face interaction in a shared location (Thompson, 1995: 221). On the other hand, media provides mechanisms for individuals to articulate views that would otherwise be marginalized or excluded from the sphere of mediated visibility - increasing characteristics such as equality or diversity.

The uses that civil organizations make of the Internet are well-known as a public platform to quickly and easily discuss topics of specific interest, with relative independence from the procedural constraints that

affect other media, such as agenda setting or framing, increasing the amount of differing or competing views (Gimmler, 2001: 33). It is from this stand point that the most enthusiastic prospects have no reservations in arguing that the Internet fulfills the necessary conditions to meet the basic requirements of Habermas's normative theory on the democratic public sphere: the internet is a universal, anti-hierarchical medium that enables universal access, non-coercive communication, freedom of expression, an unrestricted agenda, and communication outside of traditional political institutions, and that generates public opinion through discussion processes - due to these facts the Internet is considered the best medium for communication (Buchsteiner, 1997: 251).

The question on which I will focus due to its relevance from an empirical standpoint is the following: what is the real benefit of virtual discussion spaces (with their undoubted discursive potential) in stimulating deliberation within the public sphere?

If we consider the three deliberation conditions mentioned above, by Fishkin, we would expect, given the technological potential, that such conditions exist in virtual communities and in the forums generated therewith because their entire nature and operation seem to allow - and encourage - the reflection and the exchange of ideas and participation (necessary and central conditions for deliberative discourse). This expectation is, however, under the guise of a technological determinism that emphasizes the Internet as technology, instead of assessing its potential for social interaction and communication within a society, a culture and specific individuals and the uses they make of this technology.

Thus, to evaluate this previous requirement assumption, it becomes necessary to empirically explore the incidence of critical-rational discussions in online political forums, linking their incidence to the discursive and interactional offline environment in which they are based - a work already developed by a significant number of researchers, whose findings I shall take into account.

### **More communication means always more democracy: a practical evaluation**

First, many of the possibilities offered by new media and democratic participation do not cause theoretical problems: they add the advantages of the internet to existing political practices - which always results in a gain.

Since then, the simple ownership of a computer, associated with cultural capital that will allow this use within the democratic game, is a valuable resource for political participation. The new potential for expression would allow a citizen or a civil society group to reach other citizens without institutional mediation, ensuring those interested in entering the democratic game two of its key requirements: updated political information and opportunity to interact. Political communication mediated by the internet meets the conditions for the germination of a grass-roots democracy.

However, once past the initial enthusiastic phase of literature suggesting that the Internet would solve the problems of political communication, some authors began to emphasize this idea's shortcomings.

For example, today we know that universal access to virtual public spaces does not suffice to enable the intended deliberative practices. This indicator does not explain much about the quality of political discourse or the participants' tendency to deliberate rationally in accordance with their interests. Diversity of voices, despite being imperative, does not guarantee deliberation *per se*, nor negotiation and contestation of views (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995).

The following number of factors should be considered:

The first is the sense of discomfort that people have when faced with conflict, disagreement or difference. If it is true that virtual public spaces can eliminate inhibiting factors, they can also induce the demand for compliance and agreement - and therefore lead individuals to seek others with whom they had previously shared points of agreement. Studies to determine the extent of homogeneity in political opinion in UseNet newsgroups proved that people prefer to form groups with those with whom they agree, in a phenomenon known as primary group homophily. Individuals preferentially interact with others with whom they are

ideologically close. A significant number of studies reveal a tendency not to welcome divergent views in environments of online discourse. These work in terms of communities of interest, acting as virtual meeting places for people who share common interests, without changes or substantial adjustments (Wilhelm, 1999: 161).

Several studies show that political discussions online, although technically enabling a high participation level, are dominated by a few. From the detailed analysis of a discursive forum (talk.abortion), Schneider concluded that participation is "dramatically uneven". Over 80% of posts are sent by less than five percent of participants (Schneider, 1997: 85).

Another conclusion driven from empirical findings is that, due to the high number of daily posts on these forums, this does not assure an equitable or substantial exchange of views. Research shows that a large number of posts begin and end associated with research of factual information (Wilhelm, 1999:159). The deliberative use of the Internet is limited, "political actors prefer to use the internet for 'aggregation of information' through the use of online surveys and polls, and to exchange e-mails between the public and their representatives" (Polat, 2005: 446). Hence the tendency to replace deliberative discussions by plebiscite forms of democracy, focused on the individual registration of preferences on a given subject, devaluing the interactional and conversational exchange.

### **Are all forums deliberative? So, what can we do?**

We can conclude that not all political discussion on the Internet is democratic, liberal or promotes democracy. Why?

First, because messages serve mainly to magnify a person's own views and rarely to confront different ideas; next, due to the lack of messages responding, a lack caused by an interaction which is, in itself, inconsistent with a strong public sphere. Aspects such as fear of controversy, isolation, feelings of inadequacy, perceived lack of knowledge, unwillingness to challenge the group's norms, or fear of opposing the majority all contribute towards a general contraction in political discussion. Technology is used in many cases to serve a representative of a democratic model that is already established. Its use is sought to support the needs of the institutions that make up these models - like electronic voting or direct

contact with the political representatives. This is a perspective of internet use within the parameters of existing (traditional) trends of political participation, rather than a social shaping of technology.

Against this backdrop, how can this be evaluated? An assessment in these terms cannot serve as grounds for outright denying the potential of discursive spaces online. Especially because, although there is a decline in traditional forms of participation, such as party affiliation and voting in elections, people are interested in new forms of participation, such as the discussion and deliberation around certain "issues".

Moreover, the success of some cases should not be ignored. This is the case of the Minnesota e-Democracy Project or the Hansard Society's Democracy Forum (UK), where there is considerable discussion on clearly defined issues with significant efficacy (Dahlberg, 2001).

However, we should not compare online discussions with the ideal of deliberation. Instead, to assess the democratic potential of online discussions, we should refer to offline discussions, also marked by constraints and restrictions in relation to the deliberative ideal, and try to focus on the complementarity and continuity of the relations established between them. As a first end-note, we believe it is important to state that no matter how small the contribution of the online political discussion may be, democracy will always benefit from it.

I suggest that we must evaluate the extent of online discussion or the requirements of a normative ideal, but we must also identify the advantages and disadvantages of this type of interaction. This must take place by comparing situations prior to their existence. Therefore, I suggest that, as a prerequisite for the Internet's democratic potential, we must protect and encourage the opportunities for democratic deliberation that exists therewith, and provide special attention to the systemic obstacles involved in this process. As Gimmler (2001: 34) claims, in this regard, the preservation of the internet's potential towards deliberative democracy requires the existence of legal regulations and management.

Among others, the Minnesota e-Democracy Project has developed forms of deliberation that allow online use of the Internet as a virtual public sphere with relative effectiveness. This was achieved through structures such as a very precise formalization of rules and guidelines, a careful management of the discussion forum, the development of forms of self-moderation and the restriction of the number of emails sent per day per person.

Moreover, we know that future regulation of the Internet will increasingly depend on the boundaries imposed by commercial interests. There are signs that the patterns of capitalist production will transform the Internet - and its various forms – into a commercial medium, less devoted to promoting social welfare or democratic practices (Papacharissi, 2002: 20).

Even though there will be no direct control over the content of online discussion spaces, being supported corporately, they will tend to avoid controversial issues or inconveniences that may diverge from advertisers. Yet the alternative of the governments offering a space for political deliberation, although it may play a significant role in stimulating political participation, does not reflect the habermasian view of an arena for rational critical debate, independent from administrative powers.

Thus, we believe that this problem highlights the need for nonprofit organizations to supplement the supply of commercial vendors and maintain the availability to Internet access that we have today. This can be considered a decisive factor in the developing countries or regions.

Finally, we suggest that policy-makers should clearly assume the fact that unrestricted access to communication and interaction, in addition to a fundamental right of citizenship, is basic and essential for democracy.

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